

New Bedford Teachers Want Their Local Schools to Opt in to the Paid Family & Medical Leave Program

Opinion This letter was shared with us from a group of concerned local educators.

This started out as a New Bedford Voc Maternity and Paternity leave issue. However, after being told that the district had decided they “did not wish to reopen negotiations over the terms and conditions of parental leave ..., because it does not have a bargaining obligation at this time,” it became clear that this is a public school system issue as a whole. **Right now public school teachers at Voc, New Bedford, Dartmouth, and Fairhaven public schools offer no paid time off when welcoming a child into their family.** Voc specifically allows women to use any accrued time off over an 8-week period unless they can provide a doctor’s note for additional four weeks. If an individual does not have enough accrued sick time they would have to go unpaid or come back to work much earlier than a medical professional would advise. Voc only offers 20 days of use of accrued sick time to new fathers, any same-sex parents that are not the birthing parents, and adoptive parents which is not very progressive.

If you are a public school teacher in Massachusetts you are responsible for loving, nurturing, teaching, and just simply being there for the children in your class. Unfortunately, teachers are not afforded the luxury of being able to give this same attention to our own children. **As the rest of the state makes incremental strides forward when it comes to parental leave our school committees, superintendents, and city council members have made the decision, and I emphasize**

the word decision, to make the parental leave policy at this schools more restrictive than many other jobs in the state.

The public school system has refused to sign on to the state's PFML (Paid Family Medical Leave) program, which is allowable as we are a municipality. There is a major contention right now with the public school vs. charter school system, but when we look at what the two systems can offer teachers early on in their career, when most young people are starting families there is clear value being placed on the faculty and staff at one establishment and not at the other. On the one hand, you have the public school system which has refused to sign on to the paid leave that PFML would provide for all new parents regardless of how they become parents. These 12 weeks to heal and bond with their children without adding to the financial burden of not getting a paycheck and still being responsible for insurance would apply to foster parents, adoptive parents, non-birthing parents, and the birthing parents. Since charter schools are not considered part of a municipality they are not excluded from PFML law and each new parent is automatically able to take 12 weeks of paid time off.

For a long time, the administration in surrounding districts has started a "competition" between the schools. This competition has created an unspoken division between the unions in these school districts, but no more. It is time for the teachers to take a stand and demand that our families get the priority level of the children in our class. **We are asking that the current public school administrators understand that it takes three years to accrue enough sick time to take just eight weeks of maternity leave off, and that is if everything goes perfect over those three years.** I think that we can all agree with the COVID-19 pandemic things have been far from perfect and people have had to forfeit a lot of sick time over the last couple of years.

We are hoping for a fair and consistent policy. We are hoping for mutual respect. We are hoping that it is recognized that

we give the students in our class 100% every day and that our own families deserve the same. We would love for our administration, school committees, and council members to recognize the right thing to do and adopt PFML effective immediately, but as Malcolm X said, "By any means necessary."

The decision-makers on this issue are often unaffected by the financial stress of having to go unpaid just after the birth of a child placed on a young family. Many teachers are living paycheck to paycheck which is something many of the higher-ups in the cities and towns we work in have not experienced in a long time if ever. To put some of these points into perspective, the average School Superintendent's salary in both Dartmouth and New Bedford is \$178,464, in Fairhaven, it is \$178,078, and at New Bedford Voc which is one school, the current superintendent makes an annual salary of \$170,000.

Signed,
Stephanie Canery, GNBVT
Michael Perry, GNBVT
Sarah Hartley, GNBVT
Cathy Houtman, New Bedford Public Schools

Petition Link for "Teachers Deserve Maternity & Paternity Leave:

https://sign.moveon.org/petitions/teachers-deserve-maternity-paternity-leave?source=rawlink&utm_source=rawlink&share=4100660d-5988-4466-b52c-65ab10792c48&fbclid=IwAR1flvH78ueK55TurdMM0Yi5B0E92mayjEsS-xvrZFb2UENHlpEImDB6xeA

To opt into PFML as an excluded employer (public schools):

Governing body votes to opt-in under M.G.L. 157M Section 10 (i.e. school committee or city council)

The person on file for the Department of Revenue (DOR) MassTaxConnect account informs DOR that the employer intends to opt-in

DOR provides information on documents required to file an opt-in request

Notice of Election (provided by DOR from DFML)

Notarized letter from an officer confirming the governing body has elected PFML contributions

Employer logs into MassTaxConnect account and submits an e-message requesting to opt-in and attaches the 2 documents

E-message is sent to DFML, which reviews the request and either approves it or sends out a request for more information

If approved, the employer must register a new PFML account within DOR's MassTaxConnect to send contributions

The employer also must create a DFML employer account and designate a leave administrator to review PFML applications